

Illegal Asbestos Scams Reported

Vulnerable and seeking work, the homeless are becoming victims in illegal asbestos removal scams where they are employed without training or adequate protection, the Justice Department said yesterday.

The problem was highlighted with the announcement of indictments against three Wisconsin men accused of bringing workers from a Chattanooga, Tenn., homeless shelter to their state to illegally remove asbestos from a building being demolished.

Attorney General Janet Reno, calling such activity "a shameful human exploitation," promised the government would take every step to prosecute illegal asbestos removal cases that involve untrained homeless people, teenagers and unqualified day laborers.

"Knowingly removing asbestos improperly is criminal," Reno told a news conference also attended by Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Carol M. Browner. Using vulnerable people for such activity violates "the basic standard of human decency," Reno said.

Asbestos fiber, often used to insulate older buildings, is a hazardous material whose fibers can become deeply embedded in the lungs and cause respiratory illnesses and even cancer. Workers must follow special removal procedures such as wetting down the material and putting it into special containers.

The department cited prosecutions in nine states since September involving the hiring of untrained workers, often homeless people or unwary teenagers, to rip out asbestos. The department sent warning notices to homeless shelters and announced an EPA telephone hot line, 1-800-368-5888, for people to call if they believe someone is being hired for improper asbestos removal.

Ray Died of Liver Failure

NASHVILLE—The state's coroner confirmed that assassin James Earl Ray died of liver failure caused by

a chronic hepatitis infection.

But the autopsy of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s confessed killer was not able to determine how Ray contracted hepatitis, as his family had hoped.

"Since there are several different types of hepatitis and each one can be contracted in various ways, it would be an exhaustive list of possibilities at this point," medical examiner Bruce Levy said.

A blood transfusion Ray was given in 1981 after being stabbed in prison remains a possibility, although there are others, Levy said.

A doctor who represented the convict's family at the autopsy said Ray probably would have been able to live if he had received a liver transplant. Tennessee officials refused to grant Ray a furlough for the operation.

Ray died Thursday at the age of 70 in a Nashville hospital after years of failing health. He was serving 99 years in prison for killing King in Memphis in 1968.

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